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SUBJECT: THIRD SPAIN AND AFRICA WOMEN'S CONFERENCE - EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN FOR A BETTER WORLD; OFFICIAL RIBBON CUTTING FOR EMBASSY OF SPAIN AND ASSISTANCE PACKAGE FOR NIGER

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#### SUMMARY

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**¶1.** Summary. The Government of Niger (GON) played host to the 3RD annual Spain and African Women's Conference, held May 12-13, 2008, in Niamey. GON President Mamadou Tandja (the only male speaker), Government of Spain (GOS) Vice President (VP) Maria Teresa Fernandez de la Vega and GON Foreign Minister Aichatou Mindaoudou, co-hosts for the event, delivered opening remarks together with Liberia President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf and PanAfrican Congress President Gertrude Mongella. An estimated 450 conferencees, including Swaziland Vice Prime Minister Constante Simelane, several other African nations' cabinet ministers, judges, lawyers, writers and women's activists participated in the event that received wide media coverage. Soprano Barbara Hendricks, a goodwill ambassador for the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), invited as a special guest, sang in a cappella a moving chorus of the Negro spiritual "Freedom Land" at the closing ceremony. Women from several United Nations organizations (e.g., UNIFEM, UNDP, UNESCO, UNHCR), the International Organization of Migration and a number of non-governmental organizations from across the African continent served as roundtable panelists. Women heads of diplomatic missions (USA, Germany and Spain) and international organizations (World Bank, UNDP and FAO) accredited to Niger were granted observer status for the conference. The Niamey conference followed prior women's conferences in Maputo (2006) and Madrid (2007). Windhoek, Namibia is scheduled to host the 2009 conference and Valencia, Spain is scheduled to host the event in 2010, concurrent with its assumption of the European Union (EU) Presidency.

GOS VP Fernandez de la Vega took advantage of the Niamey visit to officially open Spain's Embassy in Niger and provide a bilateral assistance package, and announce a 90 million US Dollar assistance package to fight hunger and address climate change in five African countries, including Niger. End Summary.

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#### Keynote Speakers

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**¶2.** GON President Mamadou Tandja opened the 3RD Spain and African Women's Conference on May 12 under the theme, "Empowerment of Women for a Better World." He noted that the conference coincided with the 17TH anniversary of Niger's historical date of May 13, 1991, when Nigerien women marched on the capital of Niamey to demand full representation within the national conference.

**¶3.** Liberian President Johnson-Sirleaf's remarks described some of the daunting challenges she faces as head of state after many years of civil war. She reported steady progress is being made in her

country; that she remains energized by the ambitions of many young girls who, when asked about their life goals, now respond that they have set their sights on becoming the President of Liberia.

¶4. Spanish First Vice President Fernandez de la Vega noted that women make up more than 50 percent of the Spanish Parliament, a significant advancement for the women of Spain. She also credited Spanish President Rodriguez Zapatero for advancing the cause of women with his selection of women to fill senior cabinet positions, including her own. She underscored that the rise of prices for basic staples will severely hit developing nations and that women will likely suffer the most since men and children are usually the first fed in families.

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Round Tables  
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¶5. Three round tables conducted over the two-day period featured the themes: "Peace and Governability", "Social Rights and Citizenship", and "Women's Empowerment and Efficiency for Development."

¶6. Panelists on the Peace and Governability round table were Minister of Equality Bibiana Aido (Spain), Women's Network of Rio Mano for Peace representative Saran Daraba Kaba (Guinea-Conakry), public prosecutor Amina Ouedraogo (Burkina Faso) and jurist Gazobi Rahamou (Niger). The panelists noted there must be peace to alleviate poverty, that bad governance leads to conflict, which ultimately hits women and their children the hardest. Minister Aido stated that Spain may introduce a resolution at the U.N. General Assembly to promote a culture of peace. The panelists called for more solidarity of women, regardless of class, stressing the need to put instruments of law into local languages to increase rural women's knowledge of and accessibility to the law. They added that

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women perform most of the agricultural work, yet men generally reap most of the profit. They stressed that something must be done to ensure that women have equal access to nutrition. Jurist Rahamou, stating that Africans are victims of the totalitarian states inherited under colonization, must now manage several sources of conflict: natural resources (profit sharing), land usage (nomadic herders vs. sedentary farmers), arms, religious intolerance, social society (trade unions) and institutions (political parties). The panel emphasized that the United Nations was envisioned to deal with conflicts between states, such as border issues, but now with most African countries accepting the African Union's recognition of the borders established under colonization, most of the current conflicts in Africa occurs within states. Panelists cited as examples of women's progress on the continent the successful lobbying by the Liberian Bar Association (with the aid of UNIFEM) a rape law in Liberia, women occupying 49 percent of the parliamentarian seats and 45 percent of the judicial bench in Rwanda, the election of 14 women parliamentarians in 2004 vs. only 1 woman parliamentarian in the 1999 election in Niger.

¶7. The Social Rights and Citizenship panel featured jurist and former Supreme Court President Salifou Fati Bazeye (Niger), Minister of Women's Affairs and Social Action Virgilia Matabele (Mozambique), Executive Director for the Women's Right Advancement Protection Alternative (WRAPA) Hajiya Saudatu Mahdi Shehu (Nigeria) and Secretary of State for International Cooperation Leire Pajin (Spain). This panel noted that in many African countries, customary law prevails over civil law in areas such as inheritance and rights to land ownership. Citing Niger as an example, Magistrate Bazeye remarked that "Islamized custom and traditional practices" favor men, in areas such as consent to marriage, unilateral dissolution of marriage, child custody and land rights. She said while Niger signed a convention in 1964 related to marriage consent, there remain many "traditionalists" who shun the law to follow customary practices. WRAPA Executive Director Shehu added that in neighboring Nigeria sharia law results in unfair, gender-based judgment. She stated that in many African countries women are treated as second class citizens, citing citizenship law as one of the inequities. She remarked that in Nigeria women cannot to convey citizenship on a

foreign spouse, yet men can do so. She also noted that requirements for women seeking political office are more stringent in some Nigerian states, such as a requirement that a woman be born in the same jurisdiction as her spouse to be eligible to run for office. She pointed out that single women are denied the right to rent housing in some Nigerian states. GOS Secretary of International Cooperation Pagan spoke of political, social and civil rights as the three legs of citizenship. She called for greater enforcement of laws to secure women's rights, especially for the many women in exile who remain invisible to society. She emphasized the need for better education and health care for women and girls; stressed that education in sciences and other disciplines are needed both to prepare women for work other than low paying handicrafts work and to ensure women are qualified for opportunities that may materialize, including public office. Attendees spoke of women's need for greater access to lines of credit and education, and highlighted the lack of gender equality in many national constitutions.

¶8. The Empowerment of Women and Effectiveness for Development panelists were President of the International Foundation of Women's Issues Nuria Vinas (Spain), UNIFEM economic expert Yassine Fall (Senegal) and Minister of Women's Promotion and Child Protection Barry Bibatu Niandou (Niger). During this panel the attendees' mantra was, "Fewer Declarations, More Implementation." Many participants complained about the uselessness of creating women's ministries in governments without the provision of adequate resources to promote social development. During the debate, OIM representative Ndiaye noted that studies have shown that corruption diminishes with women in charge. She suggested that the GOS needs to do more to ensure that persons picked up after being trafficked to Spain receive better treatment. There was some frustration expressed by some African women that projects and ideas promoted by Africans are too often rejected. They complained about EU subsidies that harm poorer countries and the need for crop diversification and greater investment in agriculture. After a reiteration of a call for more educational opportunities for women to ensure that vital human resources are not wasted and are better prepared to assume decisionmaking positions, one woman suggested that there is a need for a U.N. Women's Development Index to complement the U.N. Human Development Index.

¶9. The two-day conference closed with a declaration pledging further collaboration between the women of Africa and Spain as follows:

-- establishment of a one million US dollar endowment to support international campaigns to fight violence against women and

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establish a dialogue between Spanish and African women through a web-based network;

-- in conjunction with the United Nations through UNIFEM, creation of a multi-donor fund to promote gender equity in political life;

-- establishing at the Fourth Conference of "Women for a Better World" an annual forum of Africa and Spain parliamentarians to promote new laws aimed at abolishing abusive practices that infringe upon the rights of women;

-- signing before the end of 2008 an agreement with the African Development Bank to make available to women five million US dollars to finance projects, business initiative and self-employment of African women;

-- organizing before the next women's meeting an international forum on sexual and reproductive health with the participation of UNFPA, UNIFEM and the governments and women's organizations of Spain and Africa;

-- launching during the course of 2009, the GOS-financed Mali training center, to establish training for African governments and African civil society and, studying the feasibility of opening similar centers in other African countries;

-- signing agreements between universities and scientific and cultural institutions to facilitate programs and promote cooperation

in these domains, including opening "Aulas Cervantes" to teach Spanish at several African universities, starting with Senegal before the next women's conference and progressing to other countries;

-- giving priority to African women at the International Fair of Contemporary Art of Spain (ARCO 2009) and, in order to encourage the African cultural industry, organizing an international meeting of African women creators at the Casa Africa;

-- organizing through a network of women, as well as African and Spanish institutions, training courses for managers/executives, in order to reinforce democracy in Africa, contribute to better governance, and improve the social, political and economic leadership of governments and African civil society;

-- launching in the coming months a Plan of Action on food security and climate change along the lines proposed at a Forum of Reflection on the subject that occurred in Niamey on May 11, 2008, to give special attention to projects advocated by women.

¶10. Participants were reminded that the next conference is slated to take place in Windhoek (2009) and the following one in Valencia (2010).

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#### New Embassy in Niamey and Assistance Package

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¶11. GOS VP Fernandez de la Vega took advantage of the visit to officiate the ribbon cutting for the new Embassy of Spain, though a GOS presence was established in Niamey a year ago. At that ceremony the GOS VP announced a 90 million US dollar assistance package to help five African nations (Burkina Faso, Benin, Guinea-Bissau, Sierra Leone and Niger) fight hunger and address climate change. The plan is to help governments with water management projects, fighting desertification, renewable energy projects and agriculture.

Niger also signed a bilateral cooperation agreement to alleviate poverty (10 million euros or approximately 18 million USD), reinforce border security (300 thousand euros or approximately 500 thousand USD) and build up Niger's food reserves (1.3 million euros or approximately 2 million USD). (Exchange rate: 1 EURO = .654 USD)

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